

WEDNESDAY Jan. 26, 2005

Castle pitches plan for C&D Canal activity

Federal, state, NCCo sharing cost of comprehensive study

By MELISSA TYRRELL
The News Journal

On a tour down the dirt roads alongside the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal two months ago, U.S. Rep. Mike Castle watched fishing enthusiasts as well as ospreys and eagles looking for a good catch.

Tuesday he was pitching his idea for an improved recreation system along the canal at a meeting of the Brandywine Rotary Club.

"I think it is the one greatest unused asset in the entire state at this point," Castle told his audience at Harry's Savoy Grill in Brandywine Hundred.

Castle has been suggesting since May that the 5,100 acres surrounding the 14-mile length of the canal should be more accessible. In December, he secured \$150,000 in federal funds for a study of the canal, looking at the feasibility of more entry points and facilities.

Official public hearings are due this spring, but Castle has already started taking his idea to the people.

The Army Corps of Engineers owns the canal and its banks, from the Delaware River to Chesapeake Bay.

Castle would like the corps to improve canal-side roadways and accessibility in the same way it did at the Cape Cod Canal in Massachusetts.

There, the corps built a visitors center, marinas, picnic pavilions and restrooms; paved parking lots and trails for biking; and offered interactive educational activities for families. Castle sees a similar future for the C&D Canal.

"I guarantee it will be well used," said Mario Nappa, president of the White Clay Bicycle Club. Nappa said he has longed for an extensive trail system in Delaware.

THE CHESAPEAKE & DELAWARE CANAL

14 miles long, from the Delaware River to Chesapeake Bay

5,100 acres owned by Army Corps of Engineers

Carries 40 percent of all ship traffic to and from the Port of Baltimore

Only major commercial waterway built in the early 1800s still in use

One of only 2 commercially vital sea-level canals in the United States

On the National Register of Historical Places

A National Historic Civil Engineering and Mechanical Engineering Landmark

Activities already there: hunting, fishing, birding, hunting dog training

Nappa, who is lobbying for the corps to create a dedicated bike path on the St. Georges Bridge, said making the canal more user-friendly would increase property values in the area.

Castle said the state and corps would have to address security for the area, as well as maintaining an area for hunting safely away from hikers, bikers and picnickers.

Tony Passerini, vice president of the Brandywine Rotary, thought Castle's plan would make the natural beauties of the canal more accessible to those who aren't serious outdoorsmen.

"I think it's a great continuation of what's being done in Delaware," said Passerini.

Maintenance wouldn't be intense and might fall to state or local agencies, Castle said. New Castle County and the state departments of Transportation and Natural Resources and Environmental Control have offered support and pledged money or in-kind services to bring the total available for the study to \$300,000.

County Executive Chris Coons has voiced support for Castle's plan, and said he'd like to see it linked with regional parks. Castle said he'd like to see the state secure the remaining parcels in the growing area to make a continuous greenway.

"I'd like to think people could go out on a nice day on a Saturday with their bikes and spend the whole day there," he said. "I hope you're as enthusiastic about it as I am."

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